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THE BRITISH ACADEMY

THE ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE  
1916

Shakespeare after  
Three Hundred Years

By

J. W. Mackail

Fellow of the Academy

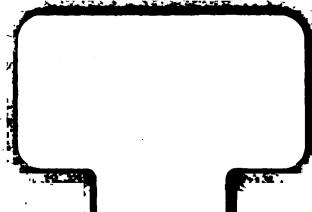
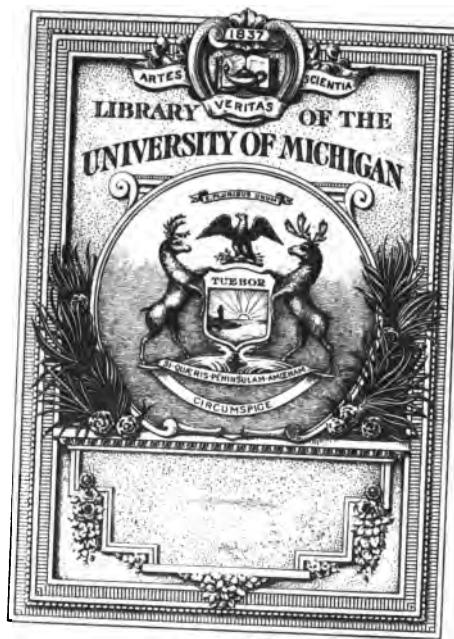
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ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE, 1916

SHAKESPEARE AFTER THREE  
HUNDRED YEARS

By J. W. MACKAIL

FELLOW OF THE ACADEMY

Five years ago, His Excellency the French Ambassador to the United States delivered the first of the Shakespeare lectures on this foundation. His address remains in the memory of all who heard or read it. But we may more particularly and with special warmth of gratitude recall how he began with a reference to the new understanding that had grown up between our two nations; how felicitously he quoted Ronsard's lines written in the year of Shakespeare's birth; and his expression of the hope that the golden age of firm amity to which the national French poet had looked forward might, in our time, come to be. The friendship has been knit close now; but for the golden age, alas! Yet if some word may be conveyed to our ally now in reply to that word of friendship, it would be that England has resolved to make good all that France can hope and expect from her. The message you would wish to give from the English nation is that of the words put by Shakespeare, just three hundred years before M. Jusserand's address, in the mouth of Posthumus when he says in Rome of his British countrymen:

Their discipline,

Now mingled with their courages, will make known  
To their approvers, they are people such  
That mend upon the world.

In humility, but with quiet confidence, we would repeat these words now.

This is the tercentenary, not of any work or word of Shakespeare's, but of his death. I come (it might almost be said) to bury Shakespeare, not to praise him. It would be using the occasion

amiss to make it one of mere customary and recapitulated eulogy. For the time is one which calls on us to revise all our values. It calls on us to discard our formulae and break our idols.

Disrobe the images  
If you do find them decked with ceremonies.

With what we have loved, as well as with what we have indolently accepted, this revaluation has to be made. Analysis and embroidery have for ages worked in or round Shakespeare. Now that both processes may seem, for the time being, to have reached exhaustion, it is worth while to try to stand back from them; to ask ourselves what Shakespeare really was, and what after three centuries he really is. For doing so, the time is doubly apt. Industry and research have accumulated, one may say with some confidence, all the facts that are of any importance, besides many more that are of none; and have not only accumulated, but weighed and assorted them. Sir Sidney Lee's *Life* in its latest form, a monumental tribute to the anniversary which we are celebrating, sums up and sets forth the ascertained and ascertainable information. To the appreciation, the vital interpretation of Shakespeare, no like limit can be put; for the secret of art is never to be won from her. Yet even in this we may make a pause, and ask how, in effect, the matter stands.

‘Let not my love be called idolatry,’ Shakespeare wrote in the *Sonnets*, ‘or my beloved as an idol shew.’ It is a counsel to be borne in mind. ‘Idolatry of Shakespeare,’ said Gibbon, with that stately detachment which is often mistaken for sarcasm, ‘is inculcated from our infancy as the first duty of an Englishman.’ His canonization had already begun when Jonson broke out with his petulant but not unreasonable protest, ‘I loved the man, and do honour his memory on this side idolatry as much as any.’ It became a fixed doctrine within a century. Dryden had already given his magnificent praise; Pope, with a fine and discriminating touch, noted that ‘men of judgment think they do any man more service in praising him justly than lavishly.’ ‘Poets,’ he adds—and the words are an anticipatory comment on much later Shakespearean criticism—‘are always afraid of envy; but sure they have as much reason to be afraid of admiration.’ Yet Pope himself says of him, in words no less true than noble, that ‘he is not so much an imitator as an instrument of nature, and ‘tis not so just to say he speaks from her, as that she spoke through him.’

Upon the enthusiasm of the eighteenth century, formulated as it advanced into that fixed idolatry recorded by Gibbon, came the

analysis of more fully equipped critics, and then the new idolatry of the romantic revival. That revival, like all revolutions, had been long prepared for, and, like all successful revolutions, resulted in something different from what its authors meant. Its results upon Shakespeare, when it wrought out its effect, were twofold. On the one hand it quickened interest, and opened out regions in him which till then had been left unexplored. On the other hand it erected him into something supernaturally inspired and mysteriously impeccable. Behind Coleridge and Hazlitt came up the army of expounders, prophets of their enthroned divinity. It was not sufficient that they should show Shakespeare to be, what he was, an adept in stagecraft, a master of language, the wielder of a versification unmatched for bright speed and supple strength. It was not sufficient that they should reaffirm him to be an instrument of nature. He must needs be also a profound thinker, a great teacher, an author in whose works may be found the key to all problems, and the quintessence of human wisdom. Nothing less than universal knowledge, nothing short of a doctrine and a message on all the matters which concern life, was claimed for one who was assumed and believed to be, in Coleridge's phrase, 'myriad-minded' and supernaturally gifted: 'the guide and the pioneer' (Coleridge's words again) 'of true philosophy.' In him, as in a Bible, all schools found what they sought.

This excess provoked its own reaction. Shakespeare the idol had swollen to such prodigious proportions that he began to topple over. Devotion led to research; research raised doubts and started theories; the process of destructive criticism began. Under a misapplication of scientific method, the Shakespearian environment threatened to swamp Shakespeare. The invention of new criteria for determining authorship in writings of mixed composition led to the early vagaries of the New Shakspere Society, in which most of the plays were taken away from him and parcelled out among a dozen of his contemporaries. The width of knowledge assigned to him by his idolaters misled a school, which still subsists, instead of questioning the premises, to draw from them a yet more preposterous conclusion.

Modern idolatry keeps breaking out in fresh forms, even more vagrant and fantastical. The illusion of reality in Shakespeare's characters is so powerful that they are thought of as existing outside and apart from the plays themselves; as though Shakespeare had suppressed or falsified material facts about them, as though the action in the plays had been misconceived by him, or were a fragment only of some larger whole which our superior

insight enables us to reconstitute. Like the conjectural emendations of a text based on the inquiry not what the author wrote but what he ought to have written, these conjectural extensions and reconstitutions offer a large playground. There is no danger in them so long as it is realized that they leave Shakespeare himself untouched. Fletcher wrote *The Tamer Tamed* as a continuation, or a rejoinder, to *The Taming of the Shrew*. A modern author has written a play introducing a younger Lear and his wife ('which her name is Mrs. Harris') with Goneril as a girl. These are legitimate exercises of fancy. And there is no reason why any one should not take the subject of one of Shakespeare's plays and make a better play of it—if he can. But to read a philosophy into Shakespeare, or to invent some 'obsession' in him and hunt for traces of it throughout his work, is not only idle but hurtful; because this stands between us and Shakespeare and vitiates our view of him. To the older heresy which claimed for its idol omniscience and infallibility, to those for whom

He is their God: he leads them like a thing  
Made by some other deity than nature,  
That shapes men better,

it might gently be answered:

A rarer spirit never  
Did steer humanity; but you Gods will give us  
Some faults to make us men.

To the newer theorists it may rather be said more sharply:

With what's unreal thou coactive art  
And fellow'st nothing.

To recall criticism from such extravagances, it is only necessary to notice facts. The 'spaciousness' of the Elizabethan age is largely an illusion. It was a period of material expansion and of intellectual activity; but it was also one of contraction, of low morality and debased art. Humanism had not struck deep in England. The reformation carried out by the Tudor monarchy, in the phrase of an eminent historian, laid its foundations in the murder of the English Erasmus, and set up its gates in the blood of the English Petrarch. In the year when Shakespeare came to London, what was left of the English Renaissance died with Sidney. The provincial middle class to which Shakespeare belonged inherited, as they transmitted, the insular virtue of easy-going good temper, and the insular failings of grossness, slovenliness, and

indolence. The first of the Shakespeares mentioned in records was hanged. The first mention of Shakespeare's own father is of his being fined for keeping a dunghill in front of his house, and the last, that he died intestate in a muddle of petty embarrassments. The child of a shiftless family in a decaying little country town might seem born to float with the stream.

In effect, he did so; and in that lies the paradox, and in some sense the secret, of his unique greatness. From first to last he moves through life

With such a careless force and forceless care  
As if that luck, in very spite of cunning,  
Bade him win all.

The stream on which he floated he took always at the flood. He strove with none, not because none was worth his strife, but because temper did not force him, or occasion induce him, to strive. He fitted into his environment (to use a Homeric simile) like an onion into its coat, at every point in close touch and engagement, with no gap and with no friction. By native instinct he takes the line of least resistance, adapting himself to fashion and circumstance with complete flexibility. When still a boy, he accepts unresistingly the marriage arranged for him by Anne Hathaway's relations. Three years later he slips away, leaving his 'clog'—it is the word used by Autolycus of Perdita—behind. He launches on London life, and takes to it like a duck to water. The 'moral incoherence' which has been noted in the Elizabethan drama was common to stage and audience. But among actors and playwrights it was accompanied by an actual immorality which excused if it did not justify the strictures of the Puritans, and the repeated but ineffective attempts of the Privy Council to close the theatres altogether. The miserable end of Greene, the more tragic and not less squalid death of Marlowe a few months later, were prologues to the Shakespearian age, and give a lurid register of the soil and atmosphere in which the Shakesperian drama came to being:

Things outward  
Do draw the inward quality after them  
To suffer all alike.

In that turbid sea of life Shakespeare finds himself. He assimilates everything he sees and hears and touches, always ready to do anything, and doing everything well. Poetry was in fashion, and patronage was valuable; so he writes *Venus and Adonis*, and dedicates it to the greatest of his great acquaintances, a dissolute

young lord of nineteen; the theatres being closed for the plague, he follows up that first adventure with *Lucrece*, but never afterwards publishes a line. Two months after his only son's death—an unusual time for such a thing—he applies for a coat of arms, and next spring buys New Place. Then the current takes a new turn, and he with it; he goes back to his professional work, not now as an assistant, but as a manager, for ten years more. By then he had come to the time of life when people begin to prefer comfort to pleasure, and to know what they do not want. But there was more in it than that. Puritanism was becoming the rising force in England. John Hall, Susanna's husband, was a strong Puritan; and not only did she adopt her husband's way of thinking, but Shakespeare himself acquiesced in it. At his entertainments of Puritan preachers in New Place one seems to hear him saying, 'I'll ne'er be drunk whilst I live again, but in honest, civil, godly company: if I be drunk, I'll be drunk with those that have the fear of God.' A conformist by instinct, he conformed to the ways of Stratford as he had done to the ways of London. Yet local chatter was not silenced. It breaks out in the loose gossip that 'he died a Papist,' and survives in the curiously sub-acid flavour of the lines written long after on Susanna's tombstone beside her father's:

Witty above her sexe, but that's not all,  
Wise to salvation was good Mistris Hall;  
Something of Shakespeare was in that, but this  
Wholy of him with whom she's now in blisse.

Shakespeare himself, the suggestion is, was not of the company.

The epithets 'sweet,' 'pleasant,' 'gentle,' habitually applied to him by his contemporaries, imply this flexibility of soft manners and far from rigid morals, as do the few anecdotes of him which have any claim to authenticity. They show him at all events as one who was acquiescent and not assertive, who avoided controversy, who chose the easiest way. And this brings us up to a point which has been so far neglected or missed that it may seem, if baldly stated, not only paradoxical but shocking. A forgotten artist of the last century, stumbling in his simplicity upon what had eluded wiser heads, and what would be angrily or contemptuously thrust aside by Shakespeare's idolaters, put it with startling clearness in four words: 'Shakespeare was like putty.' 'Shakespeare was like putty to everybody and everything: the willing slave, pulled out, patted down, squeezed anyhow, clay to every

potter. But he knew by the plastic hand what the nature of the moulder was.'

That is true; and it is essential to true appreciation. At the touch of this thin shaft of light, the facts rearrange themselves, the puzzle straightens itself out. One begins to see how it might be that in his life he was generally classed as only one among others, and that his death—a thing that has often moved wonder—passed wholly unnoticed, and did not call forth, in that copiously elegiac age, a single line of elegy. He did not impress his contemporaries greatly. Very likely we also might find him quite unimpressive, simply because he would not be occupied in impressing us. He would be doing something quite different: taking our impression. Shakespeare had *le don terrible de la familiarité*; 'every lane's end, every shop, church, session, hanging, yields a careful man work.' 'He hath known you but three days,' says Valentine to Viola of the Duke, 'and already you are no stranger': with Shakespeare, it would have taken three minutes. Not a word, not a humour, not a quality, but he immediately took its impress. On that amazing sensitive-plate were recorded every lineament of body and mind, 'all forms, all pressures past, that youth and observation copied there.' In that even more amazing developing-room the records were put together, and were reeled out so as to give the vibrating effect of life, yet of a life swifter, tenser, more vivid than that of our own actual experience. At will he could set that film-world of impressions into motion, could make its figures speak, act, think or feel, exult or suffer, as though they were really alive.

*Sine ira et studio*, the lofty ideal of the historian, was for such a faculty almost a matter of course. Nothing in Shakespeare is more remarkable than his conspicuous fairness to all his characters. He has no favourites; he has, one may even say, no antipathies. That fairness, that clarity of representation, is the index partly of an indulgent temper, but more largely of a sensitiveness which is in touch with the whole of life, not intermittently but continuously, a dramatic or (to use the Greek term) imitative power which never sleeps. His attitude towards his own creations—Shylock for instance, or Falstaff—has been warmly debated; really, he has no attitude towards them; he gives us them for what they are: with their virtues and vices, their strength and weakness, neither isolated nor commented upon, but recorded. With these, as with others, we must end by taking them as they are given. 'Generally, in all shapes that man goes up and down in, from fourscore to thirteen, this spirit walks in.' From fourscore to

## 10 ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE, 1916

thirteen; from Lear to Juliet! We are hardly justified in saying that Shakespeare hates even his villains, or loves even his heroines. Lady Macbeth, even if not what she has been lately called by a diligent Shakespearian student, 'a sunny, bright, dainty little woman,' is, as Mr. Bradley has pointed out, 'up to her light, a perfect wife.' The Queen in *Cymbeline* is, with the same reservation, a perfect mother. King John can retain to the end the absolute loyalty of Faulconbridge. Edmund was beloved. The one figure in Shakespeare for whom Shakespeare shows something like antipathy is Iago; and Iago is not quite a real person. 'I am not what I am' are his own enigmatic but significant words.

Iago's sentence is the direct negative of what Shakespeare says of himself in a sonnet which is admittedly autobiographical: 'I am that I am.' 'There is no man hath a virtue that he hath not a glimpse of, nor any man an attaint but he carries some stain of it.' To represent him otherwise is a pious fiction; it must go its way with those forms of idolatry which make him out an accomplished scholar, a trained lawyer, an expounder in dramatic allegories of the Platonic philosophy, or a profound political thinker. In all these matters he gives out the impressions made on him by the life about him. His painter in *Timon* is brilliantly true to life, but about painting he obviously knew little and cared less. Of music, from 'Sneak's noise' to ditties

Sung by a fair queen in a summer's bower,  
With ravishing division, to her lute,

he writes delightfully, but never like a musician. His age, like our own, was greatly concerned with the theory and practice of education; his own chief contribution to the subject is perhaps in the short dialogue—

Canst not read?

No.

There will little learning die then, that day thou art hanged.

Legal phraseology, as was the habit of his age, he uses copiously, even to excess; but his law, as distinct from this, is either taken straight from the story or chronicle he was dramatizing, or is frank stage-law, poetical justice unknown to any court or code. Equally baseless is the assumption of his anti-democratic temper. In the follies of his mobs, as in the sarcasms of his aristocrats, he reflects the spirit of his audience whether at Whitehall or at the Bankside. It is only a further exemplification of this, that in his later work the tone changes, and he sounds, in *Lear* and else-

where, the note of passionate pity for the poor. That note is his swift response to the ground-swell of the new democracy. The Tudor dynasty had become extinct, and with it the iron Tudor system of repression and reaction had come to an end; the revolutionary movements of the Stuart period were beginning to stir. In these later plays, as in the earlier, Shakespeare is still giving out what he received; he makes vocal, personifies, vitalizes the impressions of his actual environment. Like the poet in *Timon*—a sketch as vivid as its companion portrait of the painter—one seems to hear him say of his own work:

A thing slipped idly from me.  
Our poesy is as a gum, which oozes  
From whence 'tis nourished. The fire i' the flint  
Shews not till it be struck: our gentle flame  
Provokes itself, and, like the current, flies  
Each bound it chafes.

Research has done away with the old thoughtless idea that the body of work passing under Shakespeare's name is all his. Common sense rejects the more extravagant fancy that it embodies a *Summa Anthropologiae*, a system of human nature and a directory for human life. Yet that work in its massed total has another if a subtler kind of unity. It is not, any more than with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the unity of a *tunica inconsutilis*. The amount of non-Shakespearian work in what is called Shakespeare is considerable; this is so alike in the earlier period when he was adapting and piecing out older men's work, in the later period when younger men were doing the same with his, and even between the two, where the stage-text that has survived has been altered for performance by members of the company or by irresponsible actors. Kemp the comedian is said to have been turned out of the company of the Globe because he gagged to an extent beyond what the playwrights and his fellow actors could stand; and this was just after he had made a great success in the 'creation,' to use the modern slang, of Dogberry. How much of our Dogberry is Shakespeare, how much Kemp? *Macbeth* has notoriously reached us in a mutilated form, with interpolations as well as cuts; and whether the gag in the famous scene of the knocking at the gate is Shakespeare's own, or not, or partly both, is a question which will always be argued and always be interesting. The unity of Shakespeare (again, like the unity of Homer) is that of the Shakespearian touch, the Shakespearian inspiration, which spreads through and vivifies all

the work he laid his finger upon. By merely passing his hand over a play, he made it different; he Shakespearianized it. Hence what, to borrow a phrase from another art, may be called the flooding of his colour in composite work. Between what is pure Shakespeare and what is wholly non-Shakespearian the difference is as obvious as it is immense. But who will undertake to say, in parts of *2 Henry VI*, whether we are faced with Marlowe filled in by Shakespeare, or Shakespeare writing like Marlowe, as he still did in *King John*? in parts of *Henry VIII*, with Fletcher writing (as near as he could) like Shakespeare, or Shakespeare writing (as he easily could if he chose) like Fletcher? A few touches of the master hand have worked wonders in the coarse and repulsive tragedy of *Titus Andronicus*. The scenes which he contributed to Wilkins' *Pericles* send out as it were streamers and flashes that light up the whole play and make us glad to read over and over again what, without this irradiation, we should hardly have the patience to read twice. No other dramatist of the age had that flooding and irradiating power. When they collaborated, they either mixed mechanically, or combined, at best, into something which does not bear the impress of a single welding and controlling genius. In the *Two Noble Kinsmen*, the sharp lines of cleavage—so distinct that one can even see where Fletcher wrote in half a dozen lines in a Shakespearian scene—show that it was not a joint work, one which Shakespeare partly wrote and wholly influenced, but a case of Fletcher stringing together, and writing up into a play of his own sort, detached scenes which Shakespeare had written, and had very probably left in the Globe library among other unregarded trifles.

Appreciation must be based on comprehension. We can best honour, as we can only appreciate Shakespeare, by reading him. This is not a portentous platitude; for it is what few people do. We all read in him, which is a different thing; we most of us read into him, which is a different thing again, and a more dangerous one. The Poet Laureate, in the preface to his *Spirit of Man*, gives the pointed and wise caution that these are waters to bathe rather than to fish in. No one has begun to understand Shakespeare who has not read his plays as a whole, as a single body of work. Needless difficulties have been put in the way of doing this by the artificial and often preposterous order in which, ever since their first collection, they have been arranged. He loses by this much as the Old and New Testament do; at least it would be so if people ever read either the Bible or Shakespeare from end to

end. But people would be more likely to do that, as they could do it with fresh understanding, if both volumes were not set out with an almost heroic disregard of order and chronology.

The precise date and order of the plays are not indeed fully ascertainable. Groups overlap; the precise place of a play within a group is often uncertain; and with some at least, which were repeatedly recast and revised, it may be arguable whether to place them, in the form they have reached us, at an earlier or later point in the list. But with this reservation, and subject to a margin of error which is not great, it is possible to read the plays through in the order of their composition; and to do so opens Shakespeare out like a new world. He becomes solid and continuous: the planes come out, the lines of growth tell, the methods manifest themselves. It is of no little moment to see his work thus unroll itself. Without the intelligence that pours in from this large continuous reading of Shakespeare 'one may' in his own words 'reach deep enough and yet find little.' To bathe in Shakespeare is different from floundering and wallowing in him. It is

a course more promising  
Than a wild dedication of yourselves  
To unpath'd waters, undream'd shores:

nor, voyaged over with such a clue, do shores and waters lose anything of their marvel and richness.

The four earliest plays are trial-pieces; careful experiments in four different dramatic forms, on three at least of which he spent much work in revision and remodelling. He begins with the mixed drama of criticism and satire—what would now be called a revue—in *Love's Labour's Lost*, then takes up romantic comedy in the *Two Gentlemen*, romantic tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet*, and traditional Plautine comedy in the *Comedy of Errors*. After thus feeling his way and proving his competence, he works mainly on English history-plays for the new Rose Theatre for about three years. First he adapts and revises plays already produced, retouching Kyd, remodelling Peele and Greene, collaborating with Marlowe; then entirely rewrites an older *King John*, and carries forward the series unassisted in *Richard II* and *Richard III*. Next, letting loose as it were the accumulated pressure of romantic imagination, he flowers out into *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the loveliest and most exquisitely finished of all poetic romances. After some light work in comedy, a marked break follows, the only one in the twenty years of his dramatic activity.

Then he resumes history in the double play of *Henry IV* with new richness and amplitude. The Globe Theatre is built, and he becomes a full partner in the ownership and management. For its opening season he writes the great spectacular history of *Henry V*, and follows it up with the three central comedies, all produced, with incredible speed, in little more than a year. He was then thirty-five, just at the *mezzo del camin di nostra vita*; it is the *annus mirabilis* of his life, and of the English drama.

Then he makes a swift transition.

He was dispos'd to mirth, but on the sudden  
A Roman thought hath struck him,

and with *Julius Caesar* he opens the period of the great tragedies. They were written for what had become a more educated, more intelligent, probably more exacting audience; and more particularly, for production before a Court which, in a time empty, historians tell us, of political events, was giving not only patronage but serious attention to the drama. 'These three years,' he makes Hamlet say in 1602, 'I have taken note of it, the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes near the heel of the courtier': and the courtier too (as in *Hamlet*) was imposing his own choice of treatment on the playwright. Shakespeare moved on the crest of the wave. *Hamlet* is not only a tremendous reaction from *Twelfth Night*, it is the recognition of a new age with new requirements. *Troilus and Cressida*, following on it, is the by-product or backwash of that gigantic achievement, as a few years earlier the *Merry Wives* had been of *Henry IV*, as a few years later *Timon* is of *Lear*. The new reign carried forward a movement already begun. The 'princely' drama of Beaumont shows the culmination of the influence to which Shakespeare had already fully responded when *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear* were produced before the Court at Whitehall. In the super-drama—a name applicable here if anywhere—of *Antony and Cleopatra*, tragedy is expanding into something beyond itself. We are on the brink of a new dramatic revolution. Within the same year *Philaster* took the world captive by a fresh and enchanting dramatic manner. After it, Shakespeare writes no more tragedies.

The vogue of Beaumont's great colleague had then begun. To Fletcher's agile flexible workmanship Shakespeare shows none of the jealousy of an older artist, none of that suspicion of new methods which is so common among writers of established position. He responded to this influence as to others. In the opening scene of *Coriolanus* there are traces of Fletcher's manner, if not of his

actual hand. When Shakespeare retired Fletcher formally succeeded him as head dramatist of the company. The brief age of high concentration was over. In twenty years the English drama passed from the fiery dawn of Marlowe to the moonlit dusk of Massinger. The interval was its day, the day of Shakespeare. Before it faded away into the comedy of manners and the tragedy of sentiment, it had put out new growths: for Court representations, the masque; for popular audiences, loosely woven melodramatic romance. This change of current also Shakespeare followed before he quitted the theatre. He put a few pages of his own finest work into an artless and ill-written chronicle-romance by a hack-writer. He produced, in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, two beautiful romances of his own, adapting for the latter the sketch of a tragedy perhaps already written. In *The Tempest* he recognized and, as it were, sanctioned the masque before he finally gave the reins of dramatic control into the hands of the after-born.

His own last appearance on the stage is believed to have been in this piece. In the epilogue to it, which, though spoken by Prospero, is not part of the play and is not necessarily dramatic, we seem for once to hear Shakespeare's own voice, the voice of one making his final acquiescence:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown  
And what strength I have 's my own,  
Which is most faint. Now I want  
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant.

‘We are Time's subjects, and time bids begone.’ The lines may be set beside and balanced against what is the earliest extant piece of Shakespeare's writing, the opening words of *Love's Labour's Lost*:

Let fame, that all hunt after in their lives,  
Live registered upon our brazen tombs  
And then grace us in the disgrace of death.

It is tempting to read into these lines a preluding trumpet-flourish of his own young ambition; but though tempting, unjustified. They are Shakespeare catching and repeating (yet repeating, as always, with a difference) the accent of Marlowe. But the fame that was in his own mind was likely, at the time, less that to be gained by ‘still climbing after knowledge infinite’ than the more obvious glory of Tamburlaine's copper-laced coat and crimson velvet breeches—one of the earliest sights to dazzle his eyes when he came to London. The Sonnets show him wincing

16 ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE, 1916

under the soilure of an actor's profession, yet realizing that all fame, great and small, is alike transitory, and

lays great bases for eternity  
Which prove more short than waste or ruining.

From the early days when he was

Like one that stands upon a promontory  
And spies a far-off shore where he would tread  
until the end, we seem to hear him saying

On:  
Things that are past are done with me:  
and if he dallied with the fancy that

Time, with his fairer hand  
Offering the fortunes of his former days,  
The former man may make him,

he was surely too cognizant of life to dream of any Medea's magic  
that 'embalms and spices to the April-day again.'

From first to last Shakespeare is not an inventor or innovator. He follows all the inventions, takes them up and weighs them, puts into them, where he uses them, his own masterly technique, his own vitality. It is the same with his poems. *Venus and Adonis* is modelled on Lodge; *Lucrece*, even more closely, on Daniel. The composition of the Sonnets was in any case after the sonnet-sequence had become fashionable, and according to what seems the most reasonable view, was after that poetical method had passed its climax and begun to be old-fashioned. Perhaps his only innovation in poetical form—and it was one which he took up lightly, and which had no great result—was the unrhymed sonnet, of which two exquisite specimens may be found, by those who will look for them, in the *Two Gentlemen* and the first part of *Henry IV*. In the management of metre indeed—in his handling and development of the flexible dramatic blank verse—he explored as well as perfected. The secret of his later versification remains his, and all attempts to recreate it have been vain. Otherwise, it is almost as though he deliberately refused to make any new experiments of his own. What was about him, in art as in life, was good enough for him.

*Sufflaminandus erat*, 'the brake had to be put on him,' is Jonson's remark on Shakespeare's amazing fluency.

Faster than spring-time showers comes thought on thought,

and the expression never lags behind. Words were with him like ✓ persons and things; none escaped his notice, none did not impress him, none slipped his memory. His vocabulary still remains the largest of any English author; in light and in serious use, he pours it out with equally facile mastery. Listen to it in the mouth of Prince Hal, pretending to speak in his father's person:

There is a devil haunts thee in the likeness of an old fat man, a tun of man is thy companion; why dost thou converse with that trunk of humours, that bolting-hutch of beastliness, that swollen parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloak-bag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly, that reverend vice, that grey iniquity, that father ruffian, that vanity in years?

and compare that torrent of dancing language with the gravely copious eloquence of a serious speech:

Piety and fear,  
Religion to the gods, peace, justice, truth,  
Domestic awe, night-rest and neighbourhood,  
Instruction, manners, mysteries and trades,  
Degrees, observances, customs and laws:

or with another passage not more nobly expressed though more widely known:

Degree, priority, and place,  
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,  
Office and custom, in all line of order;  
The unity and married calm of states,  
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,  
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
The primogenitive and due of birth,  
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels.

That gigantic superflux of language never spreads out into the stagnation of verbosity; it is never 'chough's language, gabble enough and good enough'; for every word in the swarm is alive and stings. His words

as pages followed him  
Even at the heels, in golden multitudes,  
and they  
enter in our ears like great triumphers  
In their applauding gates.

The impressions of language, spoken or written, 'he took as we do air, fast as 'tis ministered.' Even in his involved elliptic later style he keeps that sheer mastery, never

like one lost in a thorny wood  
That rents the thorns and is rent with the thorns,  
Seeking a way and straying from the way,  
Not knowing how to find the open air,  
But toiling desperately to find it out;

but rather, as has been picturesquely said of him, 'crashing through the forest of words like a thunderbolt, crushing them out of shape if they don't fit in, melting moods and tenses, and leaving people to gape at the transformation.'

And so, when he puts the brake on, he can concentrate this power, and charge half a dozen simple words with all the accumulated force that he holds in reserve. An accomplished critic has cited the description in Mr. Conrad's *Typhoon* of the continuous roar of the elements swallowing up all other sounds, and contrasts with that elaborate and impressive passage a line and a half of Shakespeare:

The seaman's whistle  
Is as a whisper in the ears of death,  
Unheard.

'This is the lion's claw,' he adds; 'no other man could so strike with words.' In many such strokes—from the awful 'And Cassandra laughed' of Pandarus, to Albany's soundless 'Even so: cover their faces,' or the whisper of Imogen 'I hope I dream,' a few words of extreme simplicity carry in them an unequalled sense of vastness, an all but intolerable poignancy.

'His mind and hand went together,' Shakespeare's colleagues wrote of him. But no hand, not even his, could keep abreast of his swift envisagement of dramatic action, or of the crowd of words that rushed to express it. More and more, as he goes on, we see him, if not unable, at least too impatient to deploy his forces. Language poured in on him faster than he could put it down, and he came more and more to drive through it, one thought or image treading so hard on the heels of another that they became merged and fused. Just the same thing happened to his versification. The metrical pattern is always there, but as the loom flies it is crushed into vast deviations. Many passages in which we still feel the metrical structure can only be printed as prose, because the rhythms of speech have outrun the framework and got quite

beyond the compass of the pattern. But in the most irregular the sense of pattern is not really lost, it only is submerged and re-emerges. Both as regards putting thoughts into words and as regards putting words into verse, he gives the impression of the whole content of a speech or a scene rising in his mind together, and of his getting down on paper as much of it as he can, in what order and form he can. His apprehension is simultaneous, not consecutive. And this applies to the action as well as to the language of the plays. Only one or two, and none of the later plays, give the impression of having been composed from a scenario. The action seems to rise before the dramatist as a single complex whole; in translating this into concrete actable form he is obliged to sort it out into sequence, but he does not aim at more than dramatic coherence, than the degree of consecutiveness that satisfies an audience. If analysed further the action in the plays presents gaps, inconsistencies, sometimes even impossibilities. That Shakespeare left it so was from no deep plan. Yet art here once more triumphantly justifies the artist: for it is just this massed, partially incoherent treatment which, as much as anything else, keeps his plays from suggesting mechanism and makes them so startling a likeness of life. The vague dissatisfaction left (as its best admirers have allowed) by *As You Like It* is due less to any particular flaw than to a subconscious impression of artificial flawlessness. The inconsistencies which no ingenuity can explain away in *Othello* or *Hamlet* give these plays no slight part of their arresting and compelling power; they give, in a way that no other dramatist (unless it be Sophocles) has ever equalled, the awful and enigmatic quality of life. They keep us from 'ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge, when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.'

Shakespeare is not a moral teacher. He lets morality take care of itself; what he sets before us is life. Cruelty, falsehood, inhumanity, treachery are represented by him, as are heroism, truth, self-sacrifice: but they are neither approved nor condemned, they are only displayed, as causes with their effects, or it may be with their strange apparent effectlessness. Lady Capulet's plan to have Romeo poisoned in Mantua, Cymbeline's order for the massacre in cold blood of all his Roman prisoners, are presented without comment, and produce no result. The lesson, if it can be called one, of Shakespeare (as of Sophocles) is that we should not draw lessons, but see and feel and understand. Their attitude towards the virtues is that they are virtues, that good is different from evil. If it is

part of the scheme of things (as does not always appear) that there is a power which works for righteousness, that is only one fact of life like others. Shakespeare does not teach; he illuminates. In his clear daylight we see the world. The exaltation with which even his darkest tragedies leave us comes of our having, through him, seen it as it is, neither good nor bad in any strict meaning, but wonderful. Goneril and Cordelia, Iago and Othello, are alike parts of life: 'he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.' And it is not the lesson of Shakespeare, but the lesson of life, borne in upon us through that image of life which Shakespeare holds up before us, that good is not only different from evil, but better than evil.

Nor, any more than he is a teacher of morals, is Shakespeare a teacher of patriotism. The love and praise of England which he makes his great Englishmen utter are theirs, not his; only he makes them express themselves as none but he could do. In clearing our minds of idolatry, we must take into account not such passages only, too familiar for citation, too august for praise:

England, hedged in with the main,  
That water-walled bulwark, still secure  
And confident from foreign purposes:

This England never did nor never shall  
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,  
England, bound in with the triumphant sea:

not only these, but the representations, equally sympathetic because equally dramatic, of the merely vulgar attitude of mind towards one's native country, and of the narrow insular prejudice against foreigners—the swagger about the boy (not yet born) 'that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard,' and the ignorant conceit which sets down all Frenchmen as braggarts, all Germans as sots, and all Italians as fiends. For the highest illumination and inspiration, at a time like the present, one would turn neither to one nor the other. These may be found rather in the expression of a temper at once simpler and larger. May I cite two instances?

One is the Gloucestershire recruit, with his sound heart and his inarticulate speech, the true ancestor of hundreds of thousands of his countrymen now who have never read Shakespeare, who have never thought much or deeply, whom eloquence, rhetoric, and

poetry would leave quite unstirred, but who, like him, know their duty and do it:

I care not; a man can die but once. We owe God a death: I'll ne'er bear a base mind; an't be my destiny, so; an't be not, so. No man is too good to serve his prince; and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next.

'Well said; thou'rt a good fellow,' answers the non-commissioned officer of the recruiting party.

The other is the speech of the Greek commander-in-chief, when a bitter and obstinate war was dragging heavily, when early hopes of success had been falsified, and the national councils were distracted, the allied arms thwarted, by wrangling and recriminations:

Princes,

What grief hath set the jaundice on your cheeks?  
 The ample proposition that hope makes  
 In all designs begun on earth below  
 Fails in the promised largeness; checks and disasters  
 Grow in the veins of actions highest reared.  
 Nor, princes, is it matter new to us  
 That we come short of our suppose so far  
 That, after seven years' siege, yet Troy walls stand:  
 Sith every action that hath gone before  
 Whereof we have record, trial did draw  
 Bias and thwart, not answering the aim  
 And that unbodied figure of the thought  
 That gave 't surmised shape. Whv then, you princes,  
 Do you with cheeks abashed behold our works,  
 And call them shames, which are indeed nought else  
 But the protractive trials of great Jove  
 To find persistive constancy in men?

Once more, Shakespeare here does not teach; he illuminates. The lesson of life, the fact of life, which he lights up for us is that patriotism is not only different from, but better than, want of patriotism. He does not teach this as a lesson; he presents it as a fact.

And in the lessons, if we will call them so, or the facts of life, the ultimate and central fact is its power of self-renewal:

If the ill spirit have so fair a house,  
 Good things will strive to dwell with 't.

To the lips of each new generation comes the ecstatic cry:

O wonder!  
 How many goodly creatures are there here!  
 How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world  
 That has such people in 't!

and the older generation may realize this, and may answer, as Prospero does to Miranda, with no accent of sadness or of sarcasm, with no trace even of some superior indulgence, but with full thankfulness,

"Tis new to thee.

Perhaps, when all is said, attempts to rectify our judgment, to dismiss and cancel outworn idolatries, only leave us established in some fresh idolatry of our own. They leave us, at all events, with a feeling little short of adoration. 'I would abate him nothing, though I profess myself his adorer, not his friend.' Our predecessors of the last three hundred years often praised Shakespeare (as they blamed him) amiss:

Cats, that can judge as fitly of his worth  
 As I can of those mysteries which heaven  
 Will not have earth to know.

The mistake to which we, like them, are subject is to praise him at all. No words said of him are more exactly true than those of one who, in the last generation, was his most impassioned lover and most eloquent interpreter. After exhausting on Shakespeare all hyperboles of laudation, all glitter and pomp of rhetoric, Swinburne, as a poet and not as a panegyrist, wrote of him more simply what is the last and the unsurpassable word:

His praise is this, he can be praised of none.  
 Man, woman, child, praise God for him; but he  
 Exults not to be worshipped, but to be.  
 He is; and being, beholds his work well done.

'I cannot last ever,' says Falstaff, in one of his cross-flashes of wit and insight: 'it was alway yet the trick of our English nation, if they have a good thing, to make it too common.' But there are some good things that cannot be made too common, and that do last ever. One of these is Shakespeare.

